

# Inequalities in education in the COVID-19 pandemic: health and education professionals' perspectives

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## Introduction

Countries in Europe and beyond experienced significant school closures during the COVID-19 pandemic<sup>1</sup>. Cycles of closure and reopening during the COVID-19 pandemic, coupled with remote learning, led to concerns about increasing inequality in education that persist in 2024.

**The aim of this abstract, within a wider study of safe school reopening, is to explore health and education professionals' perceptions of inequalities among students during the pandemic.**

## References:

1. Elgar FJ, Lahti H, Lopes Ferreira J, Metkumova M, Bilz L. *Navigating uncharted territory: school closures and adolescent experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic in the WHO European Region*. Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on young people's health and well-being from the findings of the HBSC survey round 2021/2022. Copenhagen: WHO Regional Office for Europe; 2023.
2. Ross DA, Hinton R, Melles-Brewer M, et al. Adolescent well-being: a definition and conceptual framework. *Journal of Adolescent Health*. 2020 Oct 1;67(4):472-6.

## Results

- Sixty-two interviews were included in the analysis (22 health and 40 education professionals from 28 countries)
- The inequalities that were apparent in many countries' experiences of the pandemic can be considered in two categories: those resulting from economic disparities, and those from other causes
- Some parents needed to carry on working, often out of the home in poorly paid key worker roles. They were not able to supervise their children's activities
- Some students could not return to school as their family lost income during lockdown for travel and other education costs
- Those in rural areas, often underprivileged, had problems accessing the Internet – and even if a device was provided for their child's education, sometimes parents did not know what to do with it
- In bigger families, demand for private space and devices was fierce
- For students living with chronic illness and disabilities, many professionals reported that these students stayed out of school for longer than others, isolated for fear of greater vulnerability to infection

*I had a little insulin dependent diabetic. He wanted to come back, but the school refused to take him in ... So, all these little things have resulted in students being turned away with chronic or specific illnesses.  
(Teacher, Madagascar, FR08)*

*Students live very far from our schools, and they have to take buses and for you to take a bus you need money ... this pandemic has impacted terribly on the student side because many, many people have lost their jobs.  
(Mozambique, Teacher, EN40)*

## Discussion and Policy Implications

- For the future, national and local education ministries and authorities must act to prevent school closures wherever possible, to avoid long-term impact for our youth – especially those already living with disadvantage.

## Methods

- Semi-structured online qualitative interviews were conducted in 6 languages (Arabic, English, French, Mandarin, Portuguese, Spanish) with health and education professionals who had volunteered at the end of an online survey exploring their experience of the re-opening of schools during the COVID-19 pandemic
- The discussion guide included the following topics: (i) effect of the pandemic on schools, pupils and teachers; (ii) reorganisation of schools (iii) experience of implementing infection control measures in schools; (iv) intersectoral working; (v) important resources for keeping schools open
- Directed content analysis of the resulting dataset was used to seek out information relating to the 5 well-being domains proposed by Ross et al. (2020)<sup>2</sup> where Domain 3 – Safety and a Supportive Environment – includes issues of equity.



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